OPINION LITERARY QUARTERLY

Vol. I **Mansoon Issue**

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This is the last issue of *Opinion Literary Quarterly*'s first year. It has, alas, also to be the last issue of the *Quarterly*.

The final paragraph of the note announcing the *Quarterly* (April 17, 1973, *Opinion*) said:

> Here is a venture for all those interested in and concerned about English writing in India. Its survival and success will depend very largely on them.

It has to be said with regret that they failed to support it sufficiently to enable it to survive. And so, farewell, good subscribers and readers all.

A. D. G.

P.S. Those subscribers who have received less than the four issues of the year will be reimbursed for the numbers they have not received.

JEJURI

Arun Kolatkar

THE BUS

The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned down
on the windows of the state transport bus
all the way up to Jejuri.

A cold wind keeps whipping
and shapping a corner of the tarpaulin
at your elbow.

You look down the roaring road.
You search for signs of daybreak in
what little light spills out of the bus.

Your own divided face in a pair of glasses
on an old man's nose
is all the countryside you get to see.

You seem to move continually forward
towards a destination
Just beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows.

Outside, the sun has risen quietly.
It aims through an eyelet in the tarpaulin
and shoots at the old man's glasses.

A sawed off sunbeam comes to a rest
gently against the driver's right temple.
The bus seems to change direction.

At the end of the bumpy ride
with your own face on either side
when you get off the bus

you don't step inside the old man's head.

THE PRIEST

An offering of heel and haunch
on the cold altar of the culvert wall
the priest waits.

Is the bus a little late?
The priest wonders.
Will there be a puran poli in his plate?

With a quick intake of testicles
at the touch of the rough cut, dew drenched stone
he turns his head in the sun

to look at the long road winding out of sight
with the eventlessness
of the fortune line on a dead man's palm.

The sun takes up the priest's head
and pats his cheek
familiarly like the village barber.

The bit of betel nut
turning over and over on his tongue
is a mantra.

It works.
The bus is no more just a thought in his head.
It's now a dot in the distance

and under his lazy lizard stare
it begins to grow
slowly like a wart upon his nose.

With a thud and a bump
the bus takes a pothole as it rattles past the priest
and paints his eyeballs blue.

The bus goes round in a circle.
Stops inside the bus station and stands
purring softly in front of the priest.

A catgrin on its face
and a live, ready to eat pilgrim
held between its teeth.

HEART OF RUIN

The roof comes down on Maruti's head.
Nobody seems to mind.

Least of all Maruti himself.
May be he likes a temple better this way

A mongrel bitch has found a place
for herself and her puppies

in the heart of the ruin.
May be she likes a temple better this way.

The bitch looks out at you guardedly
past a doorway cluttered with broken tiles.

The pariah puppies tumble over her.
May be they like a temple better this way.

The black eared puppy has gone a little too far
A tile clicks under its foot.

It's enough to strike terror in the heart
of a dung beatle

and send him running for cover
to the safety of the broken collection box

that never did get a chance to get out
from under the crushing weight of the roof beam .

No more a place of worship this place
is nothing less than the house of god.

THE DOORSTEP

That's no doorstep.
It's a pillar on its side.

Yes.
That's what it is.

WATER SUPPLY

a conduit pipe
runs with the plinth
turns a corner of the house
stops dead in its tracks
shoots straight up
keeps close to the wall
doubles back
twists around
and comes to an abrupt halt
a brass mouse with a broken neck

without ever learning
what chain of circumstances
can bring an able bodied millstone
to spend the rest of his life
under a dry water tap.

THE DOOR

A prophet half brought down
from the cross.
A dangling martyr.

Since one hinge broke
the heavy medieval door
hangs on one hinge alone.

One corner drags in dust on the road.
The other knocks
against the high threshold.

Like a memory that gets only sharper
with the passage of time,
the grain stands out on the wood

as graphic in detail
as a flayed man of muscles who can not find
his way back to an anatomy book

and is leaning against
any old doorway to sober up
like the local drunk.

Hell with hinge and damn the jamb.
The door would have walked out
long long ago

if it weren't for
that pair of shorts
left to dry upon its shoulders.

CHAITANYA

come off it
said chaitanya to a stone
in stone language

wipe the red paint off your face
i don't think the colour suits you
i mean what's wrong
with being just a plain stone
i'll still bring you flowers
you like the flowers of zendu
don't you
i like them too

A LOW TEMPLE

A low temple keeps its gods in the dark.
You lend a matchbox to the priest.
One by one the gods come to light.
Amused bronze. Smiling stone. Unsurprised.
For a moment the length of a matchstick
gesture after gesture revives and dies.
Stance after lost stance is found
and lost again.
Who was that, you ask.
The eight arm goddess, the priest replies.
A skeptic match coughs.
you can count.
But she has eighteen, you protest.
All the same she is still an eight arm goddess to the priest.
You come out in the sun and light a charminar.
Children play on the back of the twenty foot tortoise.

THE PATTERN

a checkerboard pattern
some old men must have drawn
yesterday.

with a piece of chalk
on the back of the twenty foot
tortoise

smudges under the bare feet
and gets fainter all the time as
the children run

THE HORSESHOE SHRINE

That nick in the rock
is really a kick in the side of the hill.
It's where a hoof
struck

like a thunderbolt
when Khandoba
with the bride sidesaddle behind him on the blue
horse

jumped across the valley
And the three
went on from there like one
spark

fleeing from flint.
To a home that waited
on the other side of the hill like a hay
stack.

MANOHAR

The door was open
Manohar thought
it was one more temple.

He looked inside.
Wondering
which god he was going to find.

He quickly turned away
when a wide eyed calf
looked back at him.

It isn't another temple,
he said,
it's just a cowshed.

AN OLD WOMAN

An old woman grabs
hold of your sleeve
and tags along .

She wants a fifty paise coin.
She says she will take you
to the horseshoe shrine.

You've seen it already.
She hobbles along anyway
and tightens her grip on your shirt.

She won't let you go.
You know how old women are.
They stick to you like a burr.

You turn around and face her
with an air of finality.
You want to end the farce.

When you hear her say,
'What else can an old woman do
on hills as wretched as these?'

You look right at the sky.
Clear through the bullet holes
she has for her eyes.

And as you look on,
the cracks that begin around her eyes
spread beyond her skin.

And the hills crack.
And the temples crack.
And the sky falls

with a plateglass clatter
around the shatterproof crone
who stands alone.

And you are reduced
to so much small change
in her hand.

CHAITANỴA

sweet as grapes
are the stones of jejuri
said chaitanya

he popped a stone
in his mouth
and spat out gods

HILLS

hills
demons
sand blasted shoulders
bladed with shale

demons
hills
cactus thrust
up through ribs of rock

hills
demons
kneequartz
limestone loins

demons
hills
cactus fang
in sky meat

hills
demons
vertebrated
with rock cut steps

demons
hills
sun stroked
thighs of sand stone

hills
demons
pelvic granite
fallen archways

demons

THE PRIEST'S SON

these five hills
are the five demons
that Khandoba killed

says the priest's son
a young boy
who comes along as your guide
as the schools have vacations

do you really believe that story
you ask him

he doesn't reply
but merely looks uncomfortable
shrugs and looks away

and happens to notice
a quick wink of a movement
in a scanty patch of scruffy dry grass
burnt brown in the sun
and says

look
there's a butterfly
there

THE BUTTERFLY

There is no story behind it.
It is split like a second.
It hinges around itself.

It has no future.
It is pinned down to no past.
It's a pun on the present.

It's a little yellow butterfly.
It has taken these wretched hills
under its wings.

Just a pinch of yellow,
it opens before it closes
and closes before it o

where is it

A SCRATCH

what is god
and what is stone
the dividing line
if it exists
is very thin
at jejuri
and every other stone
is god or his cousin

there is no crop
other than god
and god is harvested here
around the year
and round the clock
out of the bad earth
and the hard rock

that giant hunk of rock
the size of a bedroom
is Kandoba's wife turned to stone
the crack that runs right across
is the scar from his broadsword

he struck her down with
once in a fit of rage

scratch a rock
and a legend springs

AJAMIL AND THE TIGERS

The tiger people went to their king
and said, 'We're starving
We've had nothing to eat,
not a bite,
for 15 days and 16 nights.
Ajamil has got
a new sheep dog.
He cramps our style
and won't let us get within a mile
of meat.'

'This is shocking,'
said the tiger king.
'Why didn't you come to see me before?
Make preparations for a banquet.
I'm gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he'll never forget.'

'Hear hear,' said the tigers.
'Careful,' said the queen.
But he was already gone.
Alone
into the darkness before the dawn.

In an hour he was back,
the good king.
A black patch on his eye.
His tail in sling.
And said, 'I've got it all planned.
now that I know the lay of the land.
All of us will have to try.
We'll outnumber the son of a bitch.
And this time there will be no hitch.
Because this time I shall be leading the attack.'
Quick as lightning
the sheep dog was.
He took them all in as prisoners of war,

the 50 tigers and the tiger king,
before they could get their paws
on a single sheep.
They never had a chance.
The dog was in 51 places all at once.
He strung them all out in a daisy chain
and flung them in front of his boss in one big heap.

'Nice dog you got there, Ajamil,'
said the tigher king.
Looking a little ill
and spitting out a tooth.
'But there has been a bit of a misunderstanding.
We could've wiped out your herd in one clean sweep.
But we were not trying to creep up on your sheep.
We feel that means are more important than ends.
We were coming to see you as friends.
And that's the truth.'

The sheep dog was the type
who had never told a lie in his life.
He was built along simpler lines
and he was simply disgusted.
Ke kept on making frantic signs.
But Ajamil, the good shepherd
refused to meet his eyes
and pretended to believe every single word
of what the tiger king said.
And seemed to be taken in by all the lies.
Ajamil cut them loose
and asked them all to stay for dinner.
It was an offer the tigers couldn't refuse.
And after the lamb chops and the roast,
when Ajamil proposed
they sign a long term friendship treaty,
all the tigers roared,
'We couldn't agree with you more.'
And swore they will be good friends all their lives
as they put down the forks and the knives.

Ajamil signed a pact
with the tiger people and sent them back.
Laden with gifts of sheep, leather jackets and balls of wool.
Ajamil wasn't a fool.
Like all good shepherds he knew

that even tigers have got to eat sometime.
A good shepherd sees to it they do.
He is free to play flute all day
as well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same pond
with a full stomach for a common bond.

A SONG FOR A VAGHYA

It tore in two
when I took
this yellow scarf
from the sun.
I know it's only a half
But I'll throw it away
When I've found
a better one.

I killed my mother
for her skin.
I must say
it didn't take much
to make this pouch
I keep turmeric in.

It's my job to carry
this can of oil.
Your's to see
it's always full.
But if I can't beg
I'll have to steal.
Is that a deal?

Khandoba's temple
rises with the day.
But it must not fall
with the night.
I'll hold it up
with a flame for a prop.
Don't turn me away.
I must have my oil, ma'am.
Give me a drop
if you can't spare a gram.

This instrument
has one string.
And one godawful itch.
As I scratch it,
it gives me just one pitch.
But if it plays
just the one note,
who am I to complain
when all I've got
is just a one word song
inside my throat?

God is the word
and I know it backwards.
I know it as fangs
inside my flanks.
But I also know it
as a lamb
between my teeth,
as a taste of blood
upon my tongue.
And this is the only song
I've always sung.

A SONG FOR A MURLI

look
the moon has come down
to graze along the hill top

you dare not ride off with it
don't you see Khandoba's brand on its flank
you horse thief

look
that's his name
tattooed just below the left collar bone

keep your hands off Khandoba's woman
you old lecher
let's see the colour of your money first

THE RESERVOIR

There isn't a drop of water
in the great reservoir the Peshvas built.

There is nothing in it.
Except a hundred years of silt.

A LITTLE PILE OF STONES

find a place
where the ground
is not too uneven
and the wind
not too strong

put a stone
on top of another
find a third
to rest on the two
and so on

choose each one
with the others in mind
each one just
the right size
the right weight

if you choose
your first stone well
the kind you can
build upon
the stones will stand

god bless you
young woman
may you be
just as lucky
as you are smart

go home now
with your husband
may you find
happiness together
and may it last

MAKARAND

Take my shirt off
and go in there to do the pooja?
No thanks.

Not me.
But you go right ahead
if that's what you want to do.

Give me the matchbox
before you go,
will you.

I will be out in the courtyard
where no one will mind it
if I smoke.

THE TEMPLE RAT

The temple rat uncurls its tail
from around the longer middle prong.
Oozes halfway down the trident
like a thick gob of black blood.

Stops on the mighty shoulder
of the warrior god
for a quick look around.
A ripple in a divine muscle.

Scarce a glance
at the fierce eyes and the war paint
on the face of Malhari Martand,
and it's gone.

The temple rat blinks
as it loops down the chain hung from the stone ceiling
and its eyes shine among heavy metal links
licked by highlights.

It slips down a slope
and looks brassily over the edge
of the bigger bell
at the green sparks shaking in the glass

bangles massed in the hands
of the teen age bride on her knees,
crushing bananas on the top
of the stone linga.

And having noticed
the trace of a smile on the priest's face,
buried under a grey, week deep beard,
the temple rat

disappears in a corner of the sanctum
just behind the big temple drum.
Not a minute too soon.
Because just then the bell springs into action.

A KIND OF A CROSS

Tail tucked between its legs
and legs tucked under a metal plated body,
the bull calf sits on a pedestal
in the temple courtyard.

You stroke a horn. Thump him on the hump
and look up at the strange instrument of torture
that even the holy bull calf
has turned his tail upon.

It's a kind of a cross that rises,
on creaky joints, above a stone platform.
It's a kind of a cross with two cross bars
you lie between and come apart,

limb from limb.
As the one with spikes and hooks
stays where it is
and the one with you on swings around.

Hills and temples dance around.
Bull calfs and tortoises swim around.
Constellations wheel overhead like vultures
in one mad carousel.

Except of course that they don't.
It's illegal.

It's the wrong time of the day
for constellations anyway.

No screaming drop of blood
firebrigades down the good wood
ten laned with time
and deepening grain.

With a fingernail, you try
to pry a rivet from the sirloin.
And hurriedly, with the ball of a thumb,
to smooth a dent from the brass rump.

THE CUPBOARD

broken glass is held together
with bits and pieces
of an old yellowed newspaper

each rectangle
of the doorframe
is an assemblage

insecure setsquares of glass
jagged slivers thrusting down
precarious trapeziums

the cupboard is full
of shelf upon shelf
of gold gods in tidy rows

you can see the golden gods
beyond the strips
of stock exchange quotations

they look out at you
from behind slashed editorials
and promises of eternal youth

you see a hand of gold
behind opinion
stiff with starch

as one would expect
there is naturally
a lóck upon the door

YESHWANT RAO

Are you looking for a god?
I know a good one.
His name is Yeshwant Rao,
and he's one of the best.
Look him up
when you are in Jejuri next.

Of course he's only a second class god
and his place is just outside the main temple.
Outside even of the outer wall.
As if he belonged
among the tradesmen and the lepers.

I've known gods,
prettier faced
or straighter laced.
Gods who soak you for your gold.
Gods who soak you for your soul.
Gods who make you walk
on a bed of burning coal.
Gods who put a child inside your wife.
Or a knife inside your enemy.
Gods who tell you how to live your life,
double your money
or triple your land holdings.
Gods who can barely suppress a smile
as you crawl a mile for them.
Gods who will see you drown
if you won't buy them a new crown.
And although I'm sure thy're all to be praised,
they're either too symmetrical
or too theatrical for my taste.
Yeshwant Rao,
mass of basalt,
bright as any post box,
the shape of protoplasm
or a king size lava pie
thrown against the wall,

without an arm, a leg
or even a single head.

Yeshwant Rao.
He's the god you've got to meet.
If you're short of a limb,
Yeshwant Rao will lend you a hand
and get you back on your feet.

Yeshwant Rao
does nothing spectacular.
He doesn't promise you the earth
or book your seat on the next rocket to heaven.
But if any bones are broken,
He'll make you whole in your body
you know he'll mend them.
and hope your spirit will look after itself.
He is merely a kind of a bone setter.
The only thing is,
as he himself has no heads, hands and feet,
he happens to understand you a little better.

THE BLUE HORSE

The toothless singer
opens her mouth.
Shorts the circuits
in her haywire throat.
A shower of sparks
flies off her half burnt tongue.

With a face fallen in on itself
and a black skin burnt blacker in the sun,
the drummer goes blue in the face
as he thumps and whacks the tambourine
and joins the chorus in a keyless passion.
His pockmarked half brother
tiddles, tweaks and twangs
on the one string thing.
God's own children
making music.

You turn to the priest
who has been good enough to arrange

that bit of sacred cabaret act at his own house
and ask him,
'The singers sang of a blue horse.
How is it then, that the picture on your wall
shows a white one?'
'Looks blue to me,'
says the priest,
shifting a piece of betel nut
from the left to the right of his mouth.
And draws an end of a nutcracker
along the underbelly of the noble animal.
Picking on a shade of blue
that many popular painters like to use
to suggest shadow on an object otherwise white.

The tambourine continues to beat its breast.

CHAITANYA

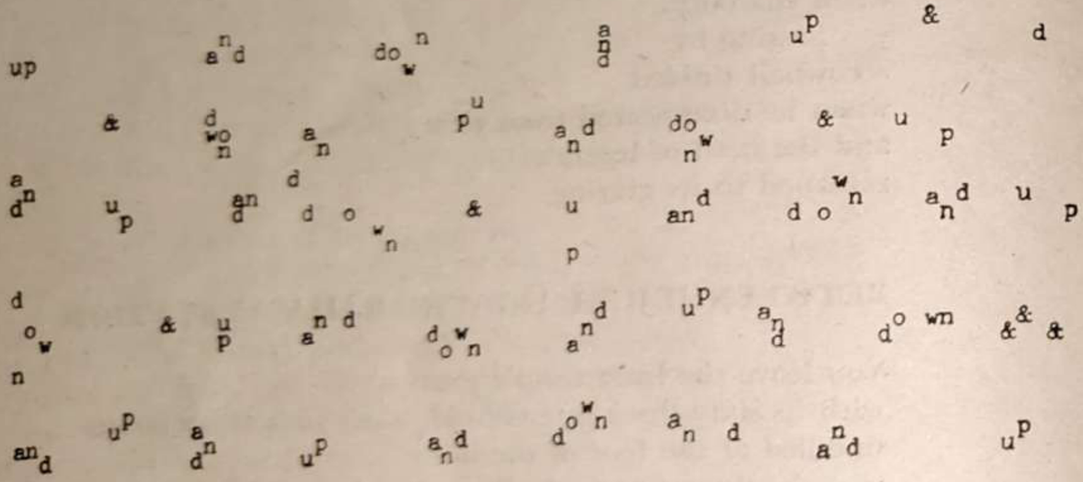
a herd of legends
on a hill slope
looked up from its grazing
when chaitanya came in sight

the hills remained still
when chaitanya
was passing by
a cowbell tinkled
when he disappeared from view
and the herd of legends
returned to its grazing

BETWEEN JEJURI AND THE RAILWAY STATION

You leave the little temple town
with its sixty three priests inside their sixty three houses
huddled at the foot of the hill
with its three hundred pillars, five hundred steps and eighteen arches.
You pass the sixty fourth house of the temple dancer
who owes her prosperity to another skill.
A skill the priest's son would rather not talk about.
A house he has never stepped inside.

and hopes he never will.
You pass by the ruin of the temple but the resident bitch is
nowhere around.
You pass by the Gorakshanath Hair Cutting Saloon.
You pass by the Mhalasakant Cafe
and the flour mill.
And that's it.
The end.
You've left the town behind
with a coconut in your hand,
a priest's visiting card in your pocket
and a few questions knocking about in your head.
You stop halfway between
Jejuri on the one and the railway station on the other hand.
You stop dead
and stand still like a needle in a trance.
Like a needle that has struck a perfect balance between equal
scales
with nothing left to add or shed.
What has stopped you in your tracks
and taken your breath away
is the sight
of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar
in a kind of a harvest dance. The craziest you've ever seen.
Where seven jump straight up to at least four times their height


up and down and up & d
& down an up and down & up
and up and down & up and down and up
down & up and down and up and down & & &
and up and up and down and and up

as five come down with grain in their beaks.

And there you stand forgetting how sily you must look
with a priest on your left shoulder as it were
and a station master on your right.

THE RAILWAY STATION

1 : the indicator

a wooden saint
in need of paint

the indicator
has turned inward
ten times over

swallowed the names
of all the railway
stations it knows

removed its hands
from its face
and put them away
in its pockets

if it knows when
the next train's due
it gives no clue

the clockface adds
its numerals

the total is zero

2 : the station dog

the spirit of the place
lives inside the mangy body
of the station dog

doing penance for the last
three hundred years under
the tree of arrivals and departures

the dog opens his right eye
just long enough to look at you and see
whether you're a man a demon a demigod

or the eight armed railway timetable come
to stroke him on the head
with a healing hand

and to take him to heaven
the dog decides
that day is not yet

3 : the tea stall

the young novice at the tea stall
has taken a vow of silence

when you ask him a question
he exorcises you

by sprinkling dishwater in your face
and continues with his ablutions in the sink

and certain ceremonies connected
with the washing of cups and saucers

4 : the station master

the booking clerk believes in the doctrine
of the next train
when conversation turns to time
he takes his tongue
hands it to you across the counter
and directs you to a superior
intelligence

the two headed station master
belongs to a sect
that rejects every timetable
not published in the year the track was laid
as apocryphal
but interprets the first timetable
with a freedom that allows him to read
every subsequent timetable between
the lines of its text

he keeps looking anxiously at the setting sun
as if the sunset was a part of a secret ritual
and he didn't want anything to go wrong with it
at the last minute
finally he nods like a stroke
between a yes and a no

and says
all timetables ever published
along with all timetables yet to be published
are simultaneously valid
at any given time and on any given track
insofar as all the timetables were inherent
in the one printed
when the track was laid

and goes red
in both his faces
at once

5 : vows

slaughter a goat before the clock
smash a coconut on the railway track
smear the indicator with the blood of a cock
bathe the station master in milk
and promise you will give
a solid gold toy train to the booking clerk
if only someone will tell you
when the next train is due

6 : the setting sun

the setting sun
touches upon the horizon
at a point where the rails
like the parallels
of a prophesy
appear to meet

the setting sun
large as a wheel

VISITORS

Adil Jussawalla

A HUSH had fallen on the house when I returned from school that day. I crossed the verandah and found three of my sisters gathered under the Russian chandelier in what everyone in the house called the hall. My English teacher had corrected me saying that in England it would always be called the living room but I didn't see that it made any difference. Besides, my relatives had sufficient grounds to believe I was mad already for me to start calling the age-old hall the living room and give them further proof.

'Hail Macbeth with one left over,' I addressed my sisters before any of them could speak. I was fourteen then and very rude. It must have been because I hated Ruiabad. I was proud of my looks and dreamt all the time of running away to Bombay and becoming an actor.

'Pappa slapped Roshan again,' Piloo gawked at me and said in awed tones.

'Hail Macbeth,' I said and went past them upstairs.

But perhaps they were right in calling it a hall because it looked like the police court of an old Mughal palace, except that we had no marble walls and most of the furniture lay unused under green and grey silk.

It was roughtly octagonal in shape, rising sixty feet to a conical roof, the narrow wall under it pierced with long wooden slats. Half-way up, round six of its sides, ran a gallery from which the bedrooms (twelve altogether) spread. Cyrus lay in one of them, his nose still broken from the stones some guys had thrown at him from inside the ginning press. He still gasped for breath.

Under the gallery there were doors which led to the verandah and the main porch and into the dining room and the back of the house. The beams under the roof were hung with straw and stored with pigeons which gurgled through the day and sparrows which crammed nests into their corners every year. The roof-beams, the gallery, the great carpet in the hall were streaked with their droppings. And dust covered everything—the beams, the drapes, the picture-frames, and at noon, when I returned from school that half-day, lots of it lay on the verandah as well.

The pictures in the hall were all portraits of my dead grandparents, great-grandparents and other relatives, mostly full-length but sometimes only bust-deep, in oval and rectangular shapes, none the same size. There was an oval portrait of my great great-gandfather dated 1807; he was dressed in black, his face under the shovel-shaped feto gleaming like a porcelain pot. Next to him was a larger portrait of his flamboyant son, seated in a carved ebony chair, wearing brilliantly-striped robes and a twisted chappati-like turban in the style of a diwan. There was a line of tall foreign trees in the background. This was the man who had established the ginning press just outside Ruiabad and built the house.

After him, the business had passed on to his younger brother as his son, my grandfather, was said to have been something of a wastrel. My mother would frown whenever anyone said his shadow had fallen on me.

But when my father came of age and frightened the life out of his grand-uncle, the business once more passed into our hands.

There were other portraits—of my great-grandfather's sisters, my grandmother, her brothers and sisters, and a full-length portrait of my mother's father, the only one of someone from her side of the family. Most of the portraits had darkened through age and the lustre in their eyes had gone, so that they all stared at us blankly, as if from the dead. But the eyes of my mother's father seemed deadest of all, and when I shone a torch into them one evening, they would not shine.

Besides these portraits, there were photographs of some of my more recently-deceased relatives, grouped on a small sideboard. Next to it was a column of black marble on which a green clay pekinese sat. Among the photographs were those of my father's granduncle and my mother's father. Small garlands hung from their frames and a fire was kept burning near them in a small silver urn.

I heard my father raise his voice in his room and saw Roshan run across the gallery to hers, while my other sisters rolled their eyes, put out their tongues and cowered against one another.

I THOUGHT I had the ugliest sisters in the world. They were all ugly except for the eldest, Freny, who was twenty. They had weak chins and prominent front teeth. I teased them a lot as I liked to see them angry and sometimes to see them cry. They often threw things at me and this I liked most of all. They were all very coarse and uneducated and spoke in a very loud voice to one another.

'Go up, fatheads, console her,' I told them, descending the stairs again.

'Start calling us fatheads again, Zarir, and you'll see,' Faranakh cried, sticking her long neck out at me.

'See what—your teeth?'

'Freny, look at him,' wailed Faranakh, whose teeth stuck out like the tiles on our servants' kholi.

'Shut up, Zarir, or you'll get two tight slaps from me,' Freny said sharply. Freny's admonitions were the only ones which ever had any effect on me, but something had got into me that day.

'Fatheads,' I repeated. From upstairs came sounds of my father shouting at my mother. Faranakh came at me and smacked me on the shoulder.

'Fatheads.' She struck the other shoulder.

'Stop!' Pesi Uncle thundered from behind the dining-room curtain. ('Uncle Pesi,' Miss Burns would say. 'We say Uncle Angus, Uncle Bertram. Say Uncle Pesi.' But she'll never read this story, so I don't give a damn what I write.) He switched to Gujarati. 'Don't you dare lift your hand against your little brother.' My sisters froze. 'One more deed like that and see if I don't tell Rusi. Gained a lot of muscle in these past few days, haven't you?'

'Just like this! Just like this! Faranakh, everyone will get a husband but not you, you shrew. You mark my words, not you,' his wife cried in her harsh flat voice, joining him at the curtain. From inside the dining room came a roar of female and male laughter.

IT was long past lunch time and they had all gathered there waiting to be fed like the poultry outside. Pesi and Soli, uncles from my father's side, Banu and Hilla, their wives, who seemed to have come down from Bombay more to see a deaf-and-dumb saint in Nizamabad than be with us, another Banu and Naja, my father's sisters, D. K. Mody, a Hyderabadi bookmaker and a good friend of my father's, and a barrister called Solomon, who, through long acquaintance with the family, had learnt to speak in the Parsi way and even read *Jam-e-Jamshed* regularly.

Piloo and Faranakh went upstairs, whimpering, Freny, more sedately, into the kitchen. Then my father called me up.

He asked me questions for the usual half hour on the texts I was reading for my exams. I was on the chapter on Rob Roy in *Reading and Writing*, Book Two. He hit me twice. The nerves in his eyes stood out like red threads. He stank of drink.

'Go and do your kasti before lunch,' he shouted finally. 'Loafer. As much as Cyrus is going to be my Rockefeller, you are going to be my buffalo. Come in the first four this time or see if I don't throw you into the well.'

We had lunch at three that day. The visitors were furious. Mody even farted once or twice to show his annoyance. But they saw something was the matter with my father and dared not say a word.

Still, Soli Uncle said the chicken was tough.

'Those with milky teeth would say so, others wouldn't,' my father said, chewing on the bones.

I was asked to call Roshan down. Her face, bloated with all her crying, looked like the puffer fish in Ackroyd and Biliar's *Science for All,* and she refused. So father sent a storm of abuse up the stairs, threatening to lash her with his riding whip. She had to sit next to him and sobbed all through the wretched meal.

We had sali boti, kababs and chicken pilao.

AFTER the pomegranates and some overripe custard apples, my father leant back and began to pick his teeth. Pesi Uncle began his usual belches. One, I counted, two, three. The women began discussing Piloo's worms.

'Mrs. Kabraji, come here.' My father had seen Siloo Aunty's shadow, furtively crossing the hall. 'Come here.'

She entered, rustling the blue bead curtains between the dining room and the hall, pale as a fish. She was the thinnest woman I had ever seen, her brocaded budyan hanging loosely on her as though she had no breasts. She dressed in mousey browns and greys since her husband died six years ago. My father always called her Mrs. Kabraji.

'Where were you going?'

'Just–just going to feed Kersy.'

'She was just going to feed Kersy,' my father addressed the silent fruit-munching company, mimicking her English and narrowing his eyes. He always spoke to her in English, perhaps because she was the only one in the house who had been to college. 'And you couldn't shout or call anyone up before that?' he went on. 'Have you left my son alone? Have you?' He rose from his chair, his face beginning to look like a badly-stirred falooda. 'Have you left my jewel alone?' He advanced on her. 'I allow you to stay in my house as a nurse, not as a dog-woman, do you understand? Not as a dog-woman. If anything happens to my genius, will any of these mules be able to run the press? Or that stupid sister of yours who can't even add two plus two together?' He turned to the company at table, looked straight at my mother, then turned to Siloo Aunty again. 'Can any of them run the press with the bookmaking and fookmaking and Bombay talk? You are supposed to be so educated. Even with your M.A., you can't understand how to look after my son? Now go and feed the dog. But wait. If there's one more time you leave my son alone again, I send you straight out of the house. Mark my words. Whether you are my wife's sister or cook or ghatan. Banu, go up at once will you and see if my son's alright?'

'Of course, vuri,' his sister-in-law cried, then went on in Gujarati. 'Has she no sense? I told you, Rusi, to get a real nurse.

'Stupid woman,' Naja Aunty said in English. Then she rubbed her fingers over her teeth till they squeaked. 'M.A. or no 'M.A.–for me she is plain M.A.D.'

'Can you do such a thing, Siloo?' Soli Uncle asked solicitously. 'You should have called me up, that was all.'

I was surprised to see that none of this seemed to have any effect on my mother, even when her poor sister retired, trembling. She had not said a word through the entire meal and sat with her hands clasped in front of her. Then, when my father heaved off to his room, she raised her dead black eyes to the company and went away noiselessly. I knew she would lock herself up in her prayer room till the evening.

The women at the table now began casting anxious looks at me and spoke very softly to one another. They thought I couldn't make out what they were saying, that they were referring to my mother and her sister. They are too stupid for words, I thought, and got up, deliberately dragging my chair. I felt like upsetting the fruit bowl and smashing the rotten custard apples one by one. Pesi Uncle crammed a fistful of grapes into his mouth, chewed them for a while, took a gulp of water and spat everything out onto a plate. Mody and Soli Uncle began saying their prayers again, untying and retying the greasy threads round their waists. I tied mine under their warty noses because I knew they'd inform my father If I didn't and returned to Rob Roy. Solomon had stretched himself out on a sofa, having made a pillow of his black coat. Then Mody dozed off in a chair and produced a low whistling snore. His wet lower lip quivered with each whistle. I swatted a few flies and had a momentary urge to throw some in.

'Ruttanshah won't budge.'

'Naturally. A man of iron. But if that fellow Nasser nationalises the canal, Panjrapore for people like us—Ruttanshah or no Ruttanshah.'

'The British are not there or what? As long as the British have shares in the canal, I defy Nasser to nationalise. Then whatever may happen. Why do you worry like hell? You know Lalkaka's bankrupt, because of that Mowjee.'

'Yes, poor fellow. And he had such a golden heart. Such a noble man.'

'But Bhilpodiwalla's case was classic. One minute he buys Mafatlal, next minute, hernia! In the share market only. It was agony, I tell you.'

'What can you do with his wife? They should put her to sleep. Sometimes mercy-killing is the only answer.'

IT was a very dry day. The afternoon sun blazed on the tiles, on the barren garden and on the corrugated-iron roofs of some derelict garages across the road. The pigeons thrummed and danced on the roof beams and the sparrows were already down on the table, carrying away crumbs from under the arms of servants flailing with the great tablecloth. I heard a bus honking far away. I felt bored and tired and ill. Two dogs were fighting in the yard and I went to the back of the house to look at them. I saw my sisters scraping the leftovers from our plates into the dry leaf-cones the beggars at the gate held out to be filled. The beggars were black and wild-looking and stood three deep. There were many children crying out with them. *Allah ke nam pur, tumhare bucche pur dua.*

I looked at my sisters and smirked. *They'd* never have any children.

The doorbell rang to the tune of the first notes of Brahm's lullaby and Yusuf Hakim strode in. My father never allowed an allopath or a surgeon to come anywhere near my brother. He had great faith in this gifted hakim. He was a small smelly man, always sweating, always smiling. He fixed his tight white coat over his paunch with one celluloid button and his sagging trousers with a knotted cord. His scalp shone like the top of a worn balustrade, and thin strands of hair lay like twisted tape on it. He carried a battered medicine-bag which jingled like a tonga horse with his bottled potions and pills. He nodded to us jauntily and went up to my brother's room. Five minutes later, he came down again with the same fixed smile on his face.

I tried to read but coudn't. Scotland seemed even duller than the house.

WHEN the clock struck four, I heard the magician's call in the yard. Then he strode in as usual, stopping to play his *ektara* at the door, bringing the smell of the desert and goats with him.

'*Salaam alekum,* Houdini,' the barrister called out heartily. 'Any calamities today?'

'Mmm,' he said as usual.

'Read my friend's future. Solomon. Cotton figures,' he winked.

The magician was very black, tall, with fine eyebrows, and eyes like pellets of rolled bread. His skin always looked dusty, probably the tint of rubbed-off ashes. He wore a dirty white cloth draped loosely over his torso and left shoulder and a string of brown beads round his neck. They looked like the beads in an old Chinese Chequers set Siloo Aunty had given me. He was the most imposing man I had ever seen.

He stood near the door now, his head high like a great black bull's, snuffing the air. Suddenly he broke into a smile and seized Mr. Solomon's palm.

While he was reading it, my father staggered out onto the gallery waving a whisky bottle. He clattered down the stairs on his wooden sandals. I could smell his breath across the hall.

'What's in the wind today?' he cried. 'Profits, eh? You tell me when to start selling. I'm lifting the lock-out tomorrow. Fifty new workers from Khiloli. But all inexperienced, all duffers.'

'Yes, yes,' the magician smiled. 'One minoot sir, I read sir's palm.'

'Be quick then. Poof! Is there no such thing as a bath in your religion?'

The magician dropped Mr. Solomon's palm and lifting his head up like a bull again, but squatting this time, he rolled his eyes and began breathing heavily.

'Huzoor, one minoot,' he whispered. 'Huzoor .... ' His eyes were fixed on the portraits as though he'd seen them for the first time. I began to smile. With any luck, we'd have a command performance today. He caught my eye, then quickly looked at the portraits again. Sometimes I felt he knew I was the only one who could see that everything he did was an act. But what an actor! Catching his eye sometimes, I'd get a thrill. It took an actor to recognise another.

'Allah-oh! he cried suddenly, clutching his head. I began barking with laughter.

'What's the matter, eh? What is it?' my father cried, looking from him to me and back again.

'Huzoor, I am ill. (He released his head and began clutching his stomach. 'No future today. Excuse.'

'Ill? Animal! Too much whisky, that's what it is. Where is it hurting you?'

'Here, there, everywhere .... ' the magician touched his head, stomach, bum.

'What's in the wind today, eh? Drink?'

'Huzoor, no fortune, no fortune,' and he prostrated himself before my father and clutched the turn-ups of his trousers.

My father began laughing so loudly at this that some pigeons began flying about the room.

'You get only half today. Boy!' He called a servant, unplugged the whisky bottle, filled an unwashed bottle of Phenol with some whisky and asked the servant to give it to the magician.

His strong hands folded round the bottle like the wings of a bat and he scrambled up saying a few 'Salaam huzoors'. Then he threw his head back, filled his chest with great draughts of air and began chanting sad incomprehensible chants which seemed to well up from some pond of grief inside him. Still chanting, he left the house.

LAST time he said I was doing a clerical job,' the bookmaker exclaimed. 'This time he just stands there and rolls his eyes! Muo gudhero. The bally idiot. If he wasn't so known to you, Rusi, I would have kicked him out straight.'

'But you are too impatient', Solomon said blandly. 'He said I would live to be a hundred. You see—this is the life line and this is the mound of Venus, and this—'

'Mound of Venus, Ho, Ho!' Soli Uncle interrupted, grinning. 'I know one mound of Venus only. He He He.'

'Fit and healthy, he told me, but everything's in the hands of God after all. That's what I always say.'

'Will someone stop those dogs barking?' Banu Aunty screamed from the recesses of her room upstairs . 'Not a wink of sleep do I get. Wow Wow Wow the whole time!'

My father seemed lost in thought for a couple of minutes, staring blankly at the floor. Then he lurched up the stairs again.

About half an hour later everyone in the house was either asleep or deathly still. Even the pigeons had stopped their hiccoughing. The first long shadows of evening had reached the wall of the verandah and I walked ed out onto it. It was getting cooler. There was a breeze coming through the eucalyptus trees, making their narrow leaves shake. A herd of thunderheads rose from behind the garages.

Piloo, Faranakh and Roshan were playing hop-scotch in the garden, squealing like babies . How ugly they are, I thought. They will never get married. The clock struck the quarter hour. How wonderfully quiet it could be here, I thought. To live here alone. Alone, I whispered. It is ten years since I felt that.

PESI Uncle brought me the news a little later. He only looked at me but I knew. 'Cyrus is dead,' I said. Freny had just begun playing Mozart's Minuet in F on the piano. She drew her hand back from the keys as though she'd touched a hot kettle and gave the most terrible shriek. Soon the house was full of shrieking women.

They all went up to his room but I remained downstairs in the hall. It seems only a few sounds came from his throat, blood came from his mouth, and he died. I looked at the portraits the magician had pretended to see for the first time, but they told me nothing new.

I looked at them for a very long time–till the clock struck six. I did not feel sorry for Cyrus. I did not feel sorry for my sisters. But I was afraid I had been very rude to them. I imagined their grief and the grief of my mother and the grief of my father. And I felt very old. So that it seemed I was my father and had lost my son not my brother.

'Please, no more visitors,' I prayed to myself, at the same time hearing an echo, 'No more visitors, please,' as Miss Burns would have liked me to say it. I had pressed by back against the wall of portraits and started hard at the bright yard, knowing they wouldn't stop that evening, that I'd have to face them. I squeezed my eyes shut as they started getting hot, then opened them again. 'No more visitors, please,' I kept hearing myself repeat, pressing my back more heavily against the wall, just as Miss Readymoney swung into sight, swaying her white parasol from side to side as she walked up the yard, gaily singing 'Daisy, Daisy,' dropping in as usual to see Mr. Solomon with whom she used to flirt.

AN AFTERNOON OF DOCTOR DAS

Jayanta Mahapatra

SIXTYTWO is a grandfather's age. Doctor Das is sixtytwo. To be exact, sixtytwo years, three months and seven days on this Saturday the second week of December. And age hurts. Bending low to pick up the morning paper on the doorstep, the years strike hard at the lower region of his spine. Probably points of calcium on his bones. His left hand moves across his side; he's feeling yellow. Not the colour of youthful suns, but ungracious, like faeces. And shiny bald head leading into his mirror. Trying to lead one's own life. He would like to come to terms with everyone, but his body lags behind of late, behaving badly, as if it was not joined to his mind any more. Taking a few deep breaths, hoping the operation would perk him up perhaps. Perhaps the mind could be handled well, if, like Circe, the body did not turn it into an animal.

What bothers him is the morning. Waking up, he jets a ball of stale spittle through the window, watches it land on a wide-hipped leaf and roll down its smooth mottled surface. At times, like today, the morning resembles night. The children away in Calcutta with his daughter, after spending nearly two months together in this large, rambling country-house. Walking around, the house now sits scoured and clean, minus the smell of sour piss and antiseptic and the Johnson baby powder. The difference. Only the two of them now. And the children something to think of. Damn them, he thinks. Damn all the grandchildren all over the world! For them the weakness, the love, the tolerance.

Covered in green plastic, those small seducers .... On top of the bookshelf he discovers an old comic book, the covers torn, corners chewed by the dog. Shit, he says under his breath, eying sly old Scrooge holding on to his pouch of dollars, flipping the pages in a half conscious motion. He feels drained all of a sudden. What is the matter with him?

You're alive still, and kicking, aren't you? So what the hell are you worried about?

The children looked up to him when they were here. It was good. Dreaming now of things like children and their neat buttocks that reveal soft faces in sudden gusts of wind. Now the long hours sitting alone, flung legs wide across the arms of the canvas chair, he assumes their love, hidden childhood noises opening on his silence. And dreams always assume.

The children. He played his years with them like cards, building them, the thin houses that would topple in a puff of breath. It seemed over now. He thinks: its the strong who cry, the weak behave like warriors all the way. And children can know. They look right into you, spot the concealed corners covered by webs and the irremovable dust.

Fool, they know. They merely go on with you. And you're glad and happy that you can fool them. Childhood is another age.

Grandfather, tell us how you got that limp. I jumped off the first floor balcony in school.

You jumped off the roof! How could you?

Well, it just happened, I guess. Or maybe I was a fool.

And so he remembered, relating the incident. The boy had dared him to jump. There was a bet of course. The sun beating down fire, a world waiting outside to discover how a man is being made out of nobody. While he held his black breath and jumped the fifteen feet onto the hard ground. That was a long time back, when he was their age more or less.

And you got a slight limp for being somebody.

HE turns and watches his wife, still extraordinarily fair, the wide freckled face showing signs of advancing age. All these years in the hard-hitting Indian sun. The streaks of grey one failed to notice among the blond shoulder-long hair.

Ah, my dear wife. Going somewhere?

Don't be a boy. This is a Saturday afternoon. The housewives-meet-day. I'll be back by eight in the evening.

Doctor Das looks up at the composed woman he has sunk, swam with, changing faces. No questions now. Those early days had been thick and heavy with this Irish wife he had settled down with. The showpiece then. And life had been great. The unindian odor of her flesh was full of a dignity which he had never been able to break through, and thus perhaps had led to a sort of betrayal through the years.

Yet life had its compensations. And the world was stuffed with other objects, other smells ......

He can hear the wild stream in the distance roaring down the sides of the mountain. Untamed. Like old times. Wave on wave, a thought of passion.

What have you to wait for? Until she goes?

The colorless sky is future. Everything has to have a very good reason. The maid comes into the room, a slip of a girl, eyes of black opal scanning the walls, dark body straining against her thin four-metre-long cloth.

Doctor Das looks at his wife as she opens her handbag, fumbles inside for a moment or two, and clicks the clasp shut with a finality before going out. Then she stops, lingers around for a while, thinking of the girl who has just begun tidying up the kitchen. Sluts, every one of them, she thinks. Bring them into the house, and there you are. Left holding a snake.

Old rascal. I have my bones to pick with you some day. When your day drips with time, and you do not ride any more. Thirtysix years. Christ, how long does one have to wait? To know you are even at last, and then to realize that a hell of a lot of good it has done to us both!

She flings some last instructions at the maid. Papee .... , I hope you heard me. All that I said.

The old man down somewhere in her mind comes between them. She observes him a little intently, as if trying to read his mind, then turns around abruptly and walks out of the room.

Doctor Das hears the car door slam shut, the engine purr and swiftly move away into the distance.

Papee, the maid, has in the meanwhile finished her work in the kitchen and is scrubbing her hands in the kitchen sink. She feels her palms slowly going hard, the surface rough, with days of hard work. Still, there was less work in this house, and the master was so good and considerate. It was her best job to date.

She hears the old man calling her: Papee, do up the beds, will you?

She enters the bedroom, finds the old man standing before the full-length mirror of the dresser. Her eyes slide up along the lemon-colored walls and come to rest on the two white-faced beds laid out side by side. A sudden thought crosses her youthful mind. What demands does an old man have after sixtytwo? In the small shack where she lived, the whole family shared a single room in the night, and yet she had never noticed anything. Nothing seemed out of place. But here ....

AND Doctor Das, waiting for a moment such as now, when he has the entire afternoon before him, carefully planned out, the whole show, words and acts that should only click into their respective places.

The girl *was* exciting. About fifteen, dark, well-oiled braided hair that swung over her slender hips as she walked. He had gone over her looks over and over in his mind, joyfully, painfully. And each time her youth reached out at him with hands that were transformed into peonies when they brushed against his wide-open skin. And so he thinks: I'd look into her eyes with all the passion I can bring out. To play his game. But she can see through him. These slum-girls know all about men and their quiet acts. Papee can feel the birds caged in his eyes. But what she does not know is that they are only made of paper, lifeless objects.

Now the birds nesting in his eyes begin to grow in size. They fill out, go out of hand.

He walks across the room and stands on the other side of the beds, watching her bend down, a tender green branch, scraggly leaves of hair falling over her lowered eyes. She does not look up at him. He stares at her, from the other side of his silence. On his mind just the song. The song of a sin.

This is exactly how he had planned things to be. But first, to win her over to his side. Confidence was the crux of the game. The rest would click afterwards.

Only it was his age that seemed to stand in the way.

Papee. Softly, he repeats her name, Papee. A bad start wrecks the whole thing.

Papee is nearly fifteen, three years older than his granddaughter. The mechanism is the same everywhere. And she is poor. Things are easier when the subject is poor. He feels confident of success.

You must be hungry, Papee, he says. Come with me.

He moves over to her side of the bed, saving his breath, which is a little deeper than before. And touches her lightly, somewhat hesitantly on the arm.

What do you see now?

That tatoo mark on your arm. Its a snake, isn't it?

The girl smiles, answers with a slight nod. And with a sudden jerky movement turns around so as to hide her tatooed arm. A new smell assails him, damp and sugary. He experiences a feeling of something flattened by the pressure of long sleep. Their eyes meet for a slender second and part. Doctor Das chooses to stare at her lips. Thick black arcs, side to side, the corners twitch and arch a little downwards. Wanting, he waits to press himself against her body.

Doctor Das takes a deep breath, remembering the girl is hungry.

For a long time he sits beside her, watching her eat the goodies he had laid out before her, observing her real relish. It is perhaps like seeing someone make love. And yet, all the time he is on the outside, fidgety, grinding away the seconds with inner restlessness, holding her free hand while she goes on eating with the right, totally unconcerned with the man seated near her. For that matter, his hands may have belonged to a child.

He edges himself closer; there's that light in her eyes he wants to draw in, inside of himself, but it seems to point elsewhere. He fights away the darkness in which he is, finding the girl so very unaware of his movements, and thinks, with suppressed irritation: Can't she realize that I want to fondle that lithe body, those simple, worldly little breasts? The breasts that kept on bobbing up and down with the passage of food?

Then he brings forward his voice, now assured, calculated:

Look, Papee, you're lovely. Don't you know that?

It appears she hasn't heard him, intent on her food.

Doctor Das moves his hand slowly up her arm, toward her left armpit. Don't, the girl says. Your hand. It tickles me. And she giggles, licking her fingers. There is an ugly yellow smear of food around her lower lip.

Coarsely, Doctor Das squeezes her smooth dark arm. Even the old sleeping snake allows itself to be caressed.

He pauses for breath. Then, leaning over her, decides to take the plunge. And lifts his hand and places it square on her left breast, holding the warm thing heavy with sleep like a baby pigeon. She says nothing, simply turning her sluggish syrupy eyes to his . He looks at her. There was no face there. Only a mouth. A mouth that went on eating in a shy way, and yet, with the instinct of a wild animal. His confidence rises, seeing the world was almost his. This is it, he says to himself, watching the uncertain half-child, half-woman, experiencing the triumph that is his.

The plan seemed to work exactly as he had thought of it in his mind. The whole afternoon was left to themselves.. He stops petting her for a moment, fetches a big bowl of sweets floating in a rich, thick syrup. Here, this is for you, he says, passing it on to her. Papee, nearly full now, gulps a whole sweet down at once, suddenly gives out a shrill squeal and begins to giggle. Somewhat alarmed, Doctor Das catches her frail shoulders and shakes her roughly. She leans against him, her breath reeking of onions from the rich food she has taken in, a pathetic fifteen-year girl, frightened by her crude behaviour.

And without warning, she lurches forward into his arms. Eyes wide open, she begins to throw out all the food she has taken.

Poor little kitten, he muses, poor weak stomach. Sad body, the tongue coated with bile he had wanted to suck like a sweet. He lays her on one of the beds, gives her water to drink, and pulls the covers over her. Then, slowly and deliberately, he brings a basin and mop, and begins to clean up the mess, a smile absurdly fixed on his lips.

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH: AN APPROACH

M. Sivaramkrishna

THE curious coexistence of creative maturity with critical naivete is one of the obvious paradoxes of contemporary Indian poetry in English. Prefaces and introductions, as well as 'analyses' and 'insights' scarcely transcend the substitution of explanation for evaluation and claims for judgement. Moreover, there is an almost studied indifference to the critical task of establishing the *differentia* in this regard. In effect, the vital function of pinpointing the nature and achievement of this poetry has remained more or less a pious intention.

....This failure stems primarily from the dichotomous nature of the overall 'critical' stance. In its simplest form, this manifests itself as the oscillation between an understandable desire to 'whore after' Western gods, critical and creative when it suits, and a tendency to switch over to 'authentic' native genius–"Indianness"–when it doesn't. In the words of David McCutchion:

> a peculiar vacillation between wishing to be praised by international standards, yet condemning criticism as from an "un-Indian' point of view, is apparent in every sphere where India's image is held up for comparison with the West, be it education, parliamentary democracy, or literature or art.

This ambivalence is so pervasive that any exacting evaluation, from rigorous aesthetic criteria is branded as "scoring off one's compatriots". Consequently, there is a pervasive tendency to *defend* rather than *demonstrate* the actual achievement. For instance, even as recently as 1972, Suresh Kohli in his "Prenote" to the Special Number of *Mahfil* felt that "Indian poetry in English has been subjected to excessive criticism by Indian critics" and "instead of recognizing its impact," these critics have tended "to condemn it though they have no solid reason to justify their condemnation of this poetry as mediocre". Therefore, pleads Kohli, "Indian poetry in English needs encouragement". The equivocation is obvious: encouragement because, probably, it cannot withstand criticism.

Another interesting—and almost predictable—extension of this equivocation is to use it as a seemingly sophisticated tool to mask flagrant contradictions stemming from apparently effective but essentially irrelevant comparisons. To this we owe such common but inept ones as, for instance, Sri Aurobindo being the Milton (or Eliot?) of India, with Brajendranath Seal closely following as the "Indian Hopkins". This game is by and large an exclusive preserve of academics who generally claim the credit of launching and perpetuating the 'critical' recognition of Indian writing in English.

The situation is further complicated by the tendency to reduce existing poetic milieu to monolithic structures. This results in a monistic, truly *advaitic,* unconcern for the actual levels of achievement. Consequently sweeping claims are advanced with enviable confidence. As Nissim Ezekiel has noted:

> The most striking feature of most discussion on the Indo-English poet is that it makes no distinction between one level of achievement and another. The highest level, the lowest level and all the levels in between, are spoken of in the same terms, using the same critical idiom and purporting to describe but in reality confusing specific poetic and intellectual qualities.

This indifference to individuation is a reflection, at a remove, of the failure to evolve a valid critical framework in which talent can be 'placed' and not either cheerily welcomed or summarily rejected. This is all the more necessary since contemporary Indian poetry in English has achieved a demonstrable measure of maturity which sustains exacting evaluation.

II

ANY attempt in this regard must reckon with the fact that the common denominator for all Indian poets using English for their creative expression is that they are Indian: incontrovertibly so, though with varying degrees of corresponding sensibility. Any critical strategy must be based on and accommodate the fact of this poetry stemming from the Indian social and cultural context.

This assumption, naively simplistic, has, however, several implications. The concept of 'Indianness' and 'Indian sensibility' has a number of usually pejorative associations crystallized around it. Moreover, it is generally dismissed as a somewhat insidious attempt by vested interests to delimit and deny the Indo-English poet his legitimate place in world-literature. In addition, there are several dangers lurking in postulating 'Indianness' as an invariable of critical evaluation. Its uncritical acceptance can easily slip into a curio-hunting for exotica, thematic and imagistic, and, as David McCutchion pointed out:

> . . . spontaneous Indianness may prove a substitute for discipline, or the deliberate pursuit of this intangible quality may result in a kind of self-mystification; . . . faults may be disguised as Indian qualities: vagueness or shoddiness on Indian resistance to form, sentimentality as Indian gentleness.

Therefore, while 'Indianness' may be regarded as a *priori*, one has to indicate checks which prevent its distortion into a unilateral assumption legitimizing all sorts of mere verbal and visual sophistry as genuine poetry. Otherwise, as K. N. Daruwalla has put it, "anyone who mentions thatch roofs and cowdung cakes thinks he is entitled to a place in Palgrave or the finest anthology going." As a result, one has to postulate the further criterion of assessing the range and extent of the poet's individual configuration in consonance with the essentially universal language of poetry, the language, in short, of generic emotion.

These dual criteria, from the perspective of the poet, are not mutually exclusive, but are capable of esemplastic fusion: the fact of being an Indian in such terms is akin to the fact of being generically human. Those who consciously project an Indian 'image' are, in this regard, as much guilty as those who deliberately claim to be 'universal'. (Correspondingly, the critical fallacies have two major sources: 'Indianness' and an element of transcendence of this 'Indianness'.) If these are not organically linked, the result would be claims such as those advanced, for instance, by A. K. Mehrotra, who, ironically, has a strong sense of contemporaneity: "I am not an Indian poet but a poet writing a universal language of poetry of feelings of love and hate and sex".

Mehrotra's contention is disarmingly frank; though considering his performance, it is prematurely so. But his remarks have the merit of drawing attention to an important—almost the only valid—criterion to judge Indian poetry in English: not the tradition of language but the language of significant emotion. To be more explicit, since 'Indian English' still lacks the nuances that make the emergence of literature on a pervasive scale possible, the canon of a *distinct* 'Indian English' cannot be wholly or meaningfully applied. Therefore, the individual use of a distinguished, unbroken linguistic tradition has, in the Indian context, peculiar implications.

This does not, however mean, that language can be regarded as a separable element of a poem; nor does it imply that one can bypass the "residue of significance in language" as the final criterion to judge poetry. All that is suggested is that 'Indian English' does not as yet, at least in the genre of poetry, amount to a valuable tradition from which it is possible to unilaterally judge a poet's achievement. Even in this regard, there is a significant transcendence, in contemporary Indian poetry in English, of the mere 'concern for correctness'—at the expense of spontaneity—which marks much of earlier poetry.

If 'Indianness' and its transcendence through generic emotions are kept in view as mutually corrective criteria, one can safely posit that

> One's sense of a single spot
> Is what one knows of the universe

In this sense, 'Indianness'—the quest for identity in the Indian milieu—ceases to be a constricting concept and becomes a viable tool with which one can reasonably 'place' a poem. Probably, it is recognition of this fact that explains the insistent sense of affirmation, of the need of 'belonging' which marks the poetry of, to name a few, Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Parthasarathy, Daruwalla and Kamala Das:

> I have made my commitments now.
> This is one: to stay where I am,
> As others choose to give themselves
> In some remote and backward place.
> My backward place is where I am.
>
> (*Ezekiel*)

> I must seek and will find
>
> my particular hell only in my Hindu mind:
> must translate and turn
> till I blister and roast
>
> for certain lives to come, 'eye-deep',
> in those Boiling Crats of Oil; weep
> iron tears for winning what I should have lost;
>
> (*Ramanujan*)

> Scrape the bottom of your past.
> Ransack the cupboard
> for skeletons of
> of your Brahmin childhood . . . .
>
> You may then perhaps
> strike out a line for yourself . . . .
> from the iron of life's ordinariness.
>
> (*Parthasarathy*)

Then why should I tread the Kafka beat
or the Waste Land
when Mother you are near at hand
one vast, sprawling defeat?

(*Daruwalla*)

...... I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.

(*Kamala Das*)

The shift in sensibility perceptible in the poetry of Ezekiel and others is in fact explicable in terms of this significant affirmation of the native roots. This is more or less tacitly admitted by almost all who have, paradxoically, achieved a relatively significant measure of transcendence of the very Indianness which forms the core of their poetry. Pritish Nandy, for instance, attributes the authenticity of contemporary Indian poetry in English to this fact:

> God alone knows whether to become *English* poets in every sense of the word .... was the ambition of the 19th century Indians writing in English, but that was something like what they became. To the extent that later Indian writers, *more conscious of their Indianness–that in fact is what they try to put across, though in English*–avoid the pitfall. I do not know whether they will eventually deliver the goods–and that is also not the ultimate question–but at least they will not be phony. (*italics mine*)

Similarly, Adil Jussawalla finds his own talent as a writer stemming from his ability to use English effectively to articulate this sensibility:

> My one point of difference with these pioneers is not in my feeling more Indian than they but simply in being able to use English to express "Indianness" more skilfully than they ever could. This is not meant to be a personal boast but just an indication that better communications and a smaller world have made a generation of Indians aware as never before of English as used by the rest of the world.

While the fact of "Indianness" can be conceded without any reservations, the tricky problem of determining its use by the individual poet remains. In other words, one has to locate levels of articulating this "Indianness" as perceptible in contemporary Indian poetry in English, with a measure of certainty. Therefore, instead of enquiring abstractly what is authentic Indian sensibility–a conundrum for which no satisfactory formula can be evolved—a relatively more helpful strategy would be to evaluate the given piece from the extant modes of ordering experience and objects: at the lowest rung would be what Nissim Ezekiel has called all that is *decoratively* Indian; slightly higher but generically the same is the descriptive—the naively descriptive mode unrelieved by any note of authentic, significant emotion and feeling; the most significant is the specifically Indian yet essentially 'universal' mode in which the poetry arises from a tension between the felt experience of being Indian and the perception of the resulting incongruities leading to a quest for resolution.

It is obvious that these are fluid and tentative divisions not preconceived frames which automatically fit and categorize existing poets. Moreover, a gifted poet is capable always of eluding all evaluative frameworks. This does not, however, preclude us from recognizing the talent as such: whether one capable of mere exotic or a naively descriptive one, or one capable of a genuine level of transcendence; of, in effect, achieving the level of poetry as "the final residue of significance in language, freed from extrinsic decoration, superficial contemporaneity and didactive bias."

III

IF these levels—and corresponding 'modes'—are kept in view, it is clear that much of Indian poetry in English oscillates between the exotic and decorative. Any number of these can be found even in the earliest anthology of *The Bengali Book of English Verse* edited by T. O. Dunn:

The moon is up—high on the cloudless sky,
Over the towering mast she brightly gleams,
Pale, like a lady sick with silent grief,
Showering her beams on everything around ....

...... there the towering palm
Mirrors its length. The scented baubool next

* * *

Bends over the wave to see its image fair.
The ample ghaut its thousand pillars rears ......
(Govin Chunder Dutt)

This, from Govin Chunder Dutt's (1828-1684) "Night On the Ganges" is undoubtedly Indian, but only picturesquely so. For sheer statistical naivete in 'poetic' cataloguing the following by Jotindra Mohan Tagore (1831-1908) is typical:

Bring CHAMPA from the bower,
Fresh blown and of a golden dye; inweave

Gay APRAJITA of the richest blue
That rivals Beauty's eyes when lit by LOVE
First dawning. BELH too,–sweet BELA cull ....

*   *   *

And with it twine ambrosial JANTI fair,
Whose fragrance well may vie with PARIJAT
Of Indra's bower ......

This sort of listening, apparently banal for our taste today, suggests in effect a decorative mode very much in evidence–and continuingly so–in much of contemporary Indian poetry in English. There is, however, one difference: while in the above extract there is no pretension to transcend the simple level of listing, the contemporary Indian poet in English makes a valiant attempt, in consonance with the changed poetic and critical milieu, to camouflage the essentially decorative/descriptive level by grafting some pseudo-emotional pattern. In other words, while the talent alternates between the decorative/descriptive level, there is a deliberate cerebral 'superadding' of an alien dimension which hardly coheres with the overall pattern. There is an undoubted intention to fuse the object and the emotion but the object remains intractable since the propelling emotion is vapid and thin.

A typical example in this regard is *Taj Mahal* by Sursh Kohli:

The Taj has inspired poets and lovers.
It inspired me too.
This white-marbled wonder of the world
This ecstatic emblem of the love
Which throbbed between a man and a woman.
I had a passion to see
This feat wrought by love–
But I was sad:
For no woman was with me ....

Even on the descriptive level, this is cliche-ridden: "white-marbled wonder of the world," "ecstatic emblem/feat wrought by love". And the regret, stemming from his personal emotion–"I was sad/For there was no woman with me," is so bathetic that it makes the poem irretrievably banal. This is all the more surprising since Kohli is capable of transcending this level as, for instance, in "Death's Epicure".

In contrast, one can consider Parthasarathy's Mahabalipuram":

Hawks in ripples circumscribe the vision:
Painstakingly a wind thumbs paragraphs
Of bright sea. In adoration bends the sky
To rocks, dreams in stone of a thousand years.

Here a king and his people built: only
The casuarina endures and survives
The penance of Arjuna, the boon
Of four-armed Siva to Bhagiratha.

Beasts roam the forest. A cat meditates.
These are stones and to the finger sweat dust.
Dreams of Time in stone, who shall tell
Us the dream, Hiuen Tsang or Manucci?

This is obviously not one of Parthasarathy's best poems and the references to "the penance of Arjuna" and the "boon to Bhagiratha" seem to circumscribe it to specific Indianness. Nevertheless, even here one can sense the poet's commitment to the craft: the language, in short, of metaphor. Moreover, the basic stance is not one of sentiment implicit in regard to monuments of a glorious past. The significance of the contemplated object is symbolic and, therefore, suggestive. Its associations range from the aspirations of "a king and his people" to the 'exotic' interest of a traveller and the classicist interested in the religious panels. There is, in effect, a muted polarity between "dreams of Time in stone" and the reality: of the stones themselves which "to the finger sweat dust". Above all, there is the relentless survival of nature: hawks, the beasts roaming the forest and the sky bending in adoration. The most significant feature, however, is language which always retains the distinction of exquisite chiselling, of what Edmund Blunden has called the 'selective richness' of diction. "A cat meditates" is as astringent as the descriptive "to the finger sweat dust."

Parthasarathy's poem highlights the fact that it is through the aesthetic of felt emotion modifying the object of contemplation—and by implication fusing idea and image—that the poet transcends the level of description and denotation. A comparable example in this regard is "The Sun Temple of Konarak" by Shiv K. Kumar. The overall emotional pattern of the poem alternates between seriousness and levity. Consequently, there is a pervasive but muted juxtaposition of contemporary ambivalence in regard to sex with the uninhibited acceptance of it as evident in the erotic sculpture on the temple. Therefore, ' These stones have wings" and

Washed by the semen
or primeval gods ......
They froze into sculpture
as the sun's haze thickened into copper.

While 'the sun's haze' could be regarded as rationalism that congeals all instinctive responses, the following lines (Since the first adultery/they have pleaded for compassion) pinpoint the inevitable nature of man's sexual compulsions, as well as lapses. But even here the same ambiguity persists: while

> From every cornice
> an owl hoots–
> do–do–do

one is conscious only of "the lady-bird counting calories/before she slumps beside me as a tombstone ...... "

It is now possible to deduce that specific Indian images, objects and situations do not by themselves in any significant way cramp creativity or critical response. The authenticity is in the aesthetic logic of the experience and not in the experience itself. If this is kept in view, for the "full appreciation" of an Indian poem in English–if it is a poem primarily–knowledge of corresponding cultural or aesthetic presuppositions is helpful and necessary but not unilaterally so. In this regard, Gauri Deshpande's "Abhisarika" is an interesting example. Its overall strategy seems to be one of finding a correlative for the essentially generic situation of insistently felt but apparently illicit love in the Sanskrit aesthetic concept of 'Abhisarika'. While the title is a clue to the background, the situation it portrays and the emotion it evokes achieve a genuine level of transcendence through the imagery as well as the perceptible tension between resisting and yielding; between "the cold dark night" and "the memory of a union when laughter/was unalloyed". The dichotomy is relayed on all levels and the imagery–"the jutting root of the looming tree", "the pale starlight" and the "cold dark night"–has nothing that is specifically Indian.

All this draws attention to the distinction one has to rigorously maintain between the functional and the decorative use of typical Indian images. The following, for example, is obviously an attempt at imagistic novelty:

> Luxuriating in the river
> Nonchalant, impassive,
> They survey reality
> With the eye of a god.
>
> Blacks blobs bounce
> In the water–
> Muddy water
> Corrugated
> With circles
> Concentric ....
>
> (*R*)

In the absence of an underlying pattern this does not seem to free itself from the vestiges of exotica. This point becomes obvious if one juxtaposes this with Daruwalla's significant use of a comparable Indian image: hooded oxen. This is from "The Night of the Jackals":

> This, she said, is the well of the goddess
> —but if it were the well of the goddess
> the rust on this persian-wheel
> would have been temple-bhog by now
> and these hooded oxen
> ploughing through eternity
> round the well, circumambulating
> they would have stored up merit enough
> to be gods in the next birth!

Daruwalla's gift as exemplified in this extract is to transcend the specific denotative and contexual limitations through clever but highly muted ironic stance: "circumambulating," for instance, would have greater impact if the reader is familiar with the Indian ritual of *Pradakshina* but in the context itself it is self-explanatory; similarly, "temple-bhog"—ritualistic offering of the gods—is idiosyncratically Indian and yet the poet gives a clue, an irreverent one, by correlating it with the "rust on the persian-wheel". [A significant use of the image of bullock is to be found, again in Ezekiel's *Background, Casually*: The song of my experience sung,/I knew that all was yet to sing./My ancestors, among the castes,/Were aliens crushing seed for bread. (The hooded bullock made his rounds).]

The extracts from Daruwalla and Ezekiel illustrate one of the primary qualities of poetry: "the modifying and interrelating of images and analogies by passion". It is lack of this which accounts for the thinness perceptible in much of contemporary Indian poetry in English. This is, however, masked by the recurring trick of equating the *familiar* with the *poetic*. If the object or the emotion happens to be a shared, familiar one, one can always make it a facade to mask lack of creativity: in effect, conceal the inability to evoke feelings which are "not available in any emotion," personal or familiar.

This trick of passing off the familiar as the poetic is particularly pervasive in poets committed to a rendering of "contemporary socio-political reality". In this regard, many poets find life in the city, with all its paradoxes, an 'intrinsically poetic' theme. Pritish Nandy's poem on Calcutta is, in several respects, a significant specimen:

> Calcutta ......
> they will pull you down from Ochterlony
> monument and torture broken rib beneath
> your upthrust breasts they will tear the anguish
> from your sullen eyes and thrust the bayonet
> between yourt thighs

Calcutta they will tear you apart Jarasandha-like

The several images of violence this passage evokes—and the reference to the mythical Jarasandha—undoubtedly communicate a felt sense of pent-up anger. And spontaneous casualness of style has a freshness but it is still the freshness of a general not a personalized pattern either of emotion or intellect. In comparison, when the poet asks us:

wait for me outside the Ujjala theatre and I will
bring you the blood of that armless leper who
went mad before hunger and death met in his
wounds

and

I will show you the fatigue of that woman who
died near Chitpur out of sheer boredom and the
cages of Burrabazar where passion hides in the
wrinkles of virgins ......

there seems to be a perceptible interweaving of image and idea but it does not wholly transcend the level of clever montage *a la* Louis Malle.

A comparable gift for projecting social paradoxes is illustrated in Arvind Mehrotra's poetry:

each house complete
with
refrigerator
transistor
telephone
car
record player
a newly married sofa set
burshane
lawn
ayah

This could as well be a listing comparable (except for "a new married sofa set," and the juxtaposition of "lawn" and "ayah") to the catalogue of flowers cited earlier. But Mehrotra is capable—in keeping with a less romantic milieu—of tearing off the mask of affluence to catch the reality of gesture without emotion:

each night
each house rattles
from the first brick to the roof
burns like a falling meteorite

as the orgasm takes place and the loop
is thrown in the teapot

Though both Nandy and Mehrotra are capable of a higher level than what is illustrated in the extracts chosen, it is obvious that, in the absence of talent, the depiction "of a general state or mood by a series of revealing details or particular instances" runs the risk of "degenerating into catalogues". Therefore, if commitment to the rendering of socio-political reality (whatever that implies) is taken as a monolithic criterion all that poetry connotes would be sharp social comment "with a sprinkling of imagery".

In comparison, Adil Jussawalla's "Sea Breeze, Bombay" is also ostensibly about the city. In its evoking, however, it blends the descriptive and the emotive effortlessly so that the images do not remain separable bric-a-brac:

Surrogate city of banks,
Brokering and bays, refugees' harbour and port,
Gatherer of ends whose brick beginnings work
Loose like a skin spotting the coast,
Restore us to fire, New refugees,
Wearing blood-red wool in the worst heat,
Come from Tibet, scanning the sea from the north,
Dazed, holes in their cracked feet.

Except for the epithet "surrogate" and the "invocation" "restore us to fire," the rest can be still regarded as on a good descriptive plane exhibiting an unerring talent for locating the revealing detail. But this level—capable of being reached by many with more or less effort—is imperceptibly, almost abruptly, transcended when this is juxtaposed with the "sea breeze" which

Cooling our garrulous evenings, investigates nothing,
Ruffles no tempers, uncovers no roof.
And settles no one adrift of the mainland's histories.

The concluding stanza, elevates the poem from the descriptive level—although even in this regard it retains its sophistication—and imbues it with authenticity and sincerity—with, in effect, the intensely *personal* stance.

IV

PART of the job of determining the core of Indian poetry in English in the previous sections has been to suggest two variable categories which are likely to be elevated into *differentia*: extrinsic decoration and superficial contemporaneity.

One more level of Indian poetry in English stems from the third category suggested earlier: "didactic bias". Its fascination for the Indian mind needs little comment. But it has curious implications in regard to poetry. While it would be futile to look for any authentic core in such "poems", it is also difficult to account for such manifestly spiritual poems as *Savitri*. *Savitri* in fact, suggests one level of this ' poetry": the level at which there is apparently no tension between the traditional values and the modern ones. Even when there is such a possibility, this is more or less resolved through the presuppositions regarding the unquestionable 'superiority' of Indian culture. This has the effect of making poetry based on this assumption, at best, one of statement. Similarly, while the dominant moods tend to alternate between nostalgia and smugness, the only 'poetic' level that the author seems to achieve is cerebral. In other words, since the basic stance is *a priori* rather than explored, all that the writer does is to find verbal—and apparently "poetic"—equivalents for what he assumes to be "profound" spiritual insights.

A recurring mode, in this type of poetry, is what may be called 'aphoristic' definition:

Liberation
    Is neither being
    Nor becoming
But fulfilment
Liberation
    Is neither life
    Nor death
But immortality.

(*Krishnaswami*)

A seemingly more sophisticated level—but in the same category—is achieved by Prof. Narmadeshwar Prasad in "Three Poems":

a big river
is Space
a tiny boat in the river
is Time
an earthen lamp in the boat
is Self

While this resembles the Upanishadic analogy, Prasad makes a feeble attempt to rescue the poem from the level of statement:

. . . spring makes fun
of my melancholy
full of tenderness, chance, false

towards the end, however, he again slips into predictable Indian spiritual stance:

What counts is living
virginal sensual
love is no climax
nor death a conclusion

in the minds of men
in the lake bottoms
in the mirrors
persist dreams.

It is obvious that Prasad is hard put to mask the Indian concept of *maya* —the persisting dreams in the lake bottoms seem nothing but that—by the "virginal sensual" living.

V

THE "poetry of the soul", in effect, suggests one extremely naive mode by which the Indian poet dissolves the basic problem which he has to face as a poet: the quest for "a usable past": whether spiritual or cultural. The problem confronts writers everywhere, but in the Indian context, it has a peculiar urgency. And in the case of a poet there can be only one mode: that of creative expression. In this regard, poetry is the reality and philosophy the illusion.

It is from this perspective that post-Independent Indian poetry in English—as exemplified in the work of Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Parathasarathy, Adil Jussawalla, K. N. Daruwalla, Jayanta Mahapatra, Gauri Despande, Kamala Das and others—may be said to strike an authentic note. This is no nostalgic "Indianness" but a fiercely contemporary one. The basic dichotomy is perceptible throughout and what Nissim Ekekiel has noted of Kamala Das, forms in fact the *differentia* of this poetry:

> The problem is not only of escaping from triviality but of finding a personal meaning. Without a personal meeting there is no individuality and therefore no modernity. The feverishness, the agitated

> assertion of a contemporary urban freedom has an authentic Indian flavour .... and is no mere imitation of the fashionable Western malaise. The setting is *naturally* Indian and not *decoratively* Indian for foreign readers, as in so much Indian writing in English. The stance between two worlds is absolutely real . . .

The intensely personal equation emerging out of this becomes clear if we juxtapose three passages dealing more or less with the same theme: the paradox of contemporary India:

Matrudesh

I know a hunger that has no eyes
But only hands that extend like claws
Into barbage cans digging for rotten
Food licking the banana leaves
Before the cows get to them,
I know a children that share
A dog's steal growl and fight
Like dog prevail like dog, . . .
I know a nation where death
Is a blessing to the dead and living.

(*G. S. Sharat Chandra*)

In India

Always, in the sun's eye,
Here among the beggars,
Hawkers, pavement sleepers,
Hutment dwellers, slums,
Dead souls of men and gods,
Burnt-out mothers, frightened
Virgins, wasted child
And tortured animals,
All in noisy silence
Suffering the place and time,
I ride my elephant of thought,
A Cezanne slung around my neck

(*Nissim Ezekiel*)

Under another sky

It's a tired sea accosts the visitor
between Fort St. George and San Thome.
Here, once, ships bottled the harbour
with spices, cinnamon and cloves.
Inland, an old civilization hissed
in the alleys and wells.

* * *

A grey sky oppresses the eyes:
porters, rickshaw-pullers, barbers,
hawkers, fortune-tellers, loungers
compose the scene. Above them towers
the bridge, a pale diamond in the water.
Trees, big with shade, squat
in the *maidan* as I walk, my tongue
hunchbacked with words, towards Jadavpur
to your arms. You smell of gin
and cigarette ash ....

(*Parthasarathy*)

What is prominent in Sharat Chandra is the pervasive stance of justifiable anger and annoyance at the dirt and squalor. To this extent it is authentic; but the profusion of details with the tiresome (self-righteous) refrain "I know", does not crystallize into any significant pattern. Even in regard to description the images are cliches: "hands that extend like 'claws". Similarly, the concluding line is a tiresome, prosaic repetition of a commonplace idea "death/Is a blessing to the dead and living".

In contrast the extracts from Ezekiel and Parthasarathy show what imagistic and linguistic control can accomplish with more or less the same theme and material. To be sure, there is 'listing' in both the extracts and to that extent they can affect the overall pattern. But, on the level of description both Ezekiel and Parthasarathy scrupulously adhere to the fact that, in the words of Cecil Day Lewis, "within the poem the images should be linked by some internal necessity stronger than the mere tendency of words to congregate in patterns". This necessity in both the poems is compulsive: to work out a meaning and not merely project an already approved one.

In their basic attitudes there is a marked difference between the two: Ezekiel alternates between identity and detachment: he is *"among* the beggars, hawkers" etc., while Parthasarathy seems to maintain a [safe?] distance from those who "compose the scene". While it is 'sun's eye" in Ezekiel, it is a "a grey sky" oppressing "the eyes "in Parthasarathy.

Similarly, though both share the same predicament—loss of identity and a consequent quest for it—the metaphoric articulation is divergent but in keeping with their basic attitudes: Ezekiel "rides an elephant of thought" with Cezanne as a decorative support, and Parthasarathy" hunch-backed with words" hurries towards "Jadavpur" and, in the presence of the woman, is aware that

> Feelings beggar description
> Shiver in dark alleys of the mind,
> hungry and alone.

Though both recognize the loss of innocence:

> I've forfeited the embarrassing gift
> innocence in my scramble to be man
>
> (*Parthasarathy*)

> I look about me now, and try
> To formulate a plainer view
>
> (*Ezekiel*)

they also trace an identical pattern in their predicament as poets, as in effect, makers of verbal dreams:

> The later dreams were all of words,
> I did not know that words betray
> but let the poems come . . .
>
> (*Ezekiel*)

> My life has come full circle: I'm thirty.
> I must give quality to the other half.
> I am alone now, loving only words.
>
> (*Parthasarathy*)

While these extracts show a remarkable concern for the craft of poetry, the one poet who has achieved an almost consistently significant level in this regard is A. K. Ramanujan. And, paradoxically, it is Ramanujan who makes the most significant—and by implication, a pervasively poetic —use of "Indianness". In his poetry, seemingly commonplace assumptions and mores of the Indian milieu acquire freshness and angularity which can only result from the utmost finesse in regard to verbal and imagistic patterns. Though, as Prof. Nagarajan has pointed out, there is an element of 'chanciness', Ramanujan's commitment to image as the decisive unit of poetic composition is invariably consistent. Even on the level of apparent description—as, for instance, in "Snakes"—there is an extraordinary control over the medium.

This is evident not only in the overall mode of wit and irony, of idea/image incongruity:

> Father, when he passed on
> left dust
> on a table full of papers,
> left debts and daughters,
> a bedwetting grandson
> named by chance
> after him,

but also in the intricate structure of relations established not so much by syntax as by what Archibald Macleish has called "the graphic background" and the "root ideas" suggested by the images:

> In Madurai,
> city of temples and poets
> who sang of cities and temples:
>
> every summer
> a river dries to a trickle
> in the sand,
> baring the sand-ribs,
> straw and women's hair
> clogging the watergates
> at the rusty bars
> under the bridges with patches
> of repair all over them,
> the wet stones glistening like sleepy
> crocodiles, the dry ones
> shaven water-buffaloes lounging in the sun.

A comparable example which, interestingly enough, makes significant use of more or less the same images—the sun, the water, the crocodile and the woman (in this case, 'the good wife')—with an almost similar aesthetic design, is Jayanta Mahapatra's "Indian Summer Poem":

> Over the soughing of the sombre wind,
> priests chant louder than ever:
> the mouth of India opens.
>
> Crocodiles move into deeper waters.

Mornings of heated middens
smoke under the sun

The good wife
lies in my bed
through the long afternoon;
dreaming still, unexhausted
by the deep roar of funeral pyres.

The sensibility in both cases is perceptibly 'Indian' but the craft is the same as in any literary tradition.

ON EXISTENTIALISM

(In the Style of a University Lecture)

Satya Dev Jaggi

WELL, I guess, Existentialism is a philosophy. I mean, not a philosophy, perhaps, but a certain way of living. Well, you might call it experiencing—the world and, well, oneself. After all that is what philosophy is! It is not just a set of books, or statements. Of course, well, you understand all that. My lectures to you on Kant, the great German Philosopher, must still be fresh on your minds, and so there's no reason why you should, well, find me incomprehensible. So existentialism can be explained as a point of view—well, well—I am sorry—well, you see. I am aware of this silly habit of mine of using the word 'well' so often—well. I do try to get rid of my defects: most Professors are not even conscious of them. Have you read my book by the way? It has some very good pages on Kant. I mean. I am no doubt an expert on Kant, though of course I have to lecture to you on other subjects too, because, you see—well—there is no other competent teacher in the University. I hope my book is available in your libraries. If not, let me know. As it is, people in the University are very lazy. They just don't work. You know there is a review of my book in 'Encounter'—a magazine of world-wide fame, sold on both sides of the Atlantic. I'll read out a portion of it. I have it here in my file. "Though an Indian, the author is able to express himself well enough in English, so that we are aware not only of what he has to say but of what he does not wish to say. In the case of most Indians, I am sorry to say, there seems to be no dividing line between what they mean to say and what they wish to leave unsaid. Not that the author under consideration is any better . . . " I am sorry, the rest of it is irrelevant to my book. I was only a kid of thirty, you know, when I happened to write it.

Kierkegaard—you know—the father of existentialism, became an author at a very young age. Well I *don't* remember the exact date when he became a Philosopher, but there is no gainsaying the fact that he is a great force in Philosophy to-day. His fundamental theory is that essence, I mean, existence precedes essence. That is what Plato failed to understand. And I have made it clear in my book too. Hegel perpetuated the same mistake. Kierkegaard cut the ground from beneath the feet of Philosophers like Plato, Hegel and Immanuel Kant. And indeed, he has given rise to a new movement not only in philosophy but literature. He has had a profound impact even on the literatures of India, and he is talked about everywhere. In the Coffee-houses of Connaught Place, the class-rooms of Delhi University, and, I presume, in lovers' bed-chambers as also in midnight romantic parks, his thought has introduced a new intensity in the language of love. Man is alone. And, well, he can find no real refuge outside the self. He has to commit himself, to make his own choice and the choice has to be made through anguish, through an intense act of self-realization. You see, how much like the Vedanta his philosophy is. Though, of course, Indian philosophy is far more comprehensive and profound than western philosophy, in which there is nothing to match the heights of fantasy scaled by our ancient Indian thinkers, and seers.

THERE are well, all kinds of modern existentialist thinkers. There are Sartre, Marcel, and Heidegger and many others. Kierkegaard is their Guru. Though, of course, they have each their own independent world of thought and passion. A woman, for them, is not a substitute for man. A man seeks to get lost in a woman. And a woman seeks her fulfilment in a man. Both are seeking to establish their identity in the other! But, well, true identity can be realized only when this constant seeking, this constant longing to forget oneself in a moment of passion, howsoever exquisite in itself, ceases. Well, of course, it is a profound thought. It is partly mine, of course, even though, I am only giving it is an illustration. You know, I am a man of international reputation. And now I am supposed to be working on my second book. I may be considered for the award of Nobel Prize for all I know. But, of course, I don't attach any kind of importance to that sort of thing—it would only falsify my status as a Philosopher. How can I after all parade myself with a baby's laurel crown on my head? I, who have lived among the greatest of the world's thinkers! I certainly am not going to accept Nobel Prize or any other prize for that matter. Well, whether I am wise or not, you know better than I. But, well, for my pursuit of wisdom, I seek no reward and no recognition. I only seek God. Well, you know what I mean. I am no more thralled by worldly desires and temptations. All that this world has to offer, I have had.

At any rate, well, I am sorry. Well, existentialist thought is above all concerned with the actual human condition. Knowledge and so-called wisdom can never comprehend the real self. They in a way seek even to go beyond the self, but since knowledge is ultimately of the self alone, they can never go beyond it, and, indeed, the self being inexhaustible, it remains for ever unknown in the realm of the Infinite where our finite vision can never hope to make any significant dent. However, Eternity is a lie, unless it can be seen to be a function of the particular human situation. A man is not just another man, not simply a member of a species of animals. His animality may unite him with the world, but beyond this animality is this existential individuality, which can never be subsumed under any kind of Universals. Supposing I am an ass. Now can my being an ass rob me of the fact of my *being*, just because there are other assess around me. You there, don't be giggling there like an ass. I am not saying I am an ass. I was just giving you an example. Well, well. The reason of my incomprehension of this universal datum is that I am all the time looking at the world, rather than experiencing it: all the time trying to formulate, dogmatise, rather than feel: ever ready to assume, and subsume, prove and disprove, argue and pursuade, rather than let the total being make its own assessment of its inherent and concrete particularity. The essence of existence is particularity, the particular blue colour, the particular oblong shape of the nose, the particular crease of a particular pair of trousers. Understanding is only another name for misunderstanding. Being is only another category of non-being. Truth is only the opposite of falsehood. Both truth and falsehood are false categories of the intellect. Intellect is the enemy of true culture, enemy of the existential emancipation from the dogmas of universality that harass and constrict the sound, struggling to free itself from the anguish of suffering and the bondage of the uncertainty of existence. Existence is suffering, as the Buddha taught. Intellect has to be abandoned for a final climb on the ladder of Reality, as Bradley has shown us. Ideas are but pale versions of reality, that throbbing beauty of the flesh 'our hearts found delightful'. What in this world can match the passion that men and women manifest towards each other? What happens, however, when this passion is made into a concept, and men and women are made into examples of species, male and female, and love is demonstrated to be merely a glandular secretion. I ride a horse, hear the sound of its trot on a fine metallic road. I play upon the banjo, and swing to the tune of its ecstasy. And a crack of a philosopher comes and tells me that I am only a man, that music is only music, that a horse is only a horse, putting an end to the feel of particularity, and end to the curled incense of my encounter with the concrete and delicious particulars.

WELL, well. Do not imagine for a moment these are own views. In fact, in my opinion, it is all humbug. And I would be an ass to agree with it. Indeed, I thoroughly disagree. And I was simply making an impersonal statement of what the existentialists mean to tell us. But the so-called existentialists are fools. They don't realize the distinction between appearance and reality, between transcendental concepts and transcendent ideas, between Imagination and Reason and, above all, between

Kant and Hegel. You may reject Hegel, but how can you dismiss Immanuel Kant?—Kant who has revolutionised modern philosophy, who, single-handed, revised the entire structure of philosophical speculation, who drove metaphysics out of court, and still found reasons to justify it. A man in whom contradictions are reconciled, as in Nature herself, could not possibly go wrong. Thus Kant being irrefutable, we cannot help concluding that existentialism must be a sham. Revolting against reason, existentialism does not seek to be rationally understood. We need not therefore find any rational arguments to refute it. It stands refuted as it is, for anything that can be said in its favour can equally validly be said against it also.

WELL, well, we in India to-day are strangely apathetic towards philosophical thought. However, I am not, unlike certain persons, going to leave my country for that reason. I must instead seek to establish that harmony that once existed between the philosopher and the 'mule' that a layman essentially is. With that purpose in view, I am hoping to start a journal after my retirement. I must, well, shake our people out of their intellectual apathy. Maybe I can hook some industrialist to give financial support for carrying out my project. It's a fashion to have philosopher-kings so-called, but I have no such aspirations. If ever I had wanted to run after empty glory, I would not have been content to remain a Professor all my life. I simply wish to see India recover her lost heritage, and re-claim her kinship with the gods. Well, well, where did I leave? O, yes! well, existentialism! I simply can't make any sense out of it. Do they want us to turn into animals? I, at least, won't consent to be the kind of ass they want us to become. They want us to shed off all material comforts. Do they also want us to live without shoes?—is a pertinent question to ask them. By the way, this time, I spent about sixty-five rupees on shoes—a Professor has, after all, to maintain a certain amount of dignity. Existentialism doesn't go against reason alone; it goes against life itself. It is a hotch-potch of literary conundrums rather than a clear synthesis, a pot-pourri of irreconcilables rather than a gleam of 'life divine'. I would ask you not to waste your time on these nincompoops, these ninnies, who call themselves existentialists and dare to undertake carrying the terrible burden of philosophical speculation. I suggest that you read Shri Aurobindo's book 'Life Divine' in the vacation. He'll open your souls to the great intellectual waste that is yet to be philosophically cultivated. You may fail to understand his words, but words, after all, are not important. Your primary task, as responsible students, of philosophy is to get behind words (and kick their behinds, if possible), and clutch at the substance of meaning. Never, never remain slaves of sound and syntax. Aurobindo communicates to us the mystery of the incommunicable, the incommunicable mystery of being. Above all, read my book. (The bell rings). Well, well, well....

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REVIEW

GANGA

The first thing you notice about this book[1] is its sumptuousness. It is visually satisfying, beautifully printed and interestingly laid out. It comes close to satisfying the Indian's endless curiosity about this river which is so close to his spirit as to be more a feeling than a river. And that is where the book fails us a little. After Ganga has reached Hardwar, the photographs, with some exceptions, become hackneyed. The earlier feeling of a stark and indifferent divinity gives way to pictures of multitudes bathing, or of flooded roads and shops. Unfortunately, the sense of many thousands of years of history which has taken place on her banks is lacking. Instead of the splendid onrush of Ganga in spate, we have drowned shops and cycle-rickshaws. The space could have been more vividly used to make the sort of ironic statements Mr. Singh is capable of making as in pp. 80 and 81, which show terribly well-fed sadhus looking ferocious and militant. The most touching flashes in the later pages are father and son praying, widows entirely smothered in shrouds, rain-soaked women in Bihar, elephants bathing (however, the trampled mahout boy achieves nothing). Though the shots of sadhus buried in sand and sleeping on thorns are mainly for foreign consumption, we cannot scoff at them entirely, as they are novelties to most of us too. The truly arresting pictures in the section of the book dealing with Ganga towards her mouth are the shots of boats in various lights. On the whole, one could say that the first fifty pages of pictures, showing Ganga from her source to Hardwar raise our expectations regarding composition and originality, that the latter don't fulfill.

The commentary is thorough, readable and factual. Mr. Newby, in effect, seems to have more of a feeling about Ganga-the-feeling than does Mr. Singh. A reader could do worse than save up to buy this as a Christmas present for friends abroad.

G.D.

[1] Ganga: Raghubir Singh (Photographs) and Eric Newby (Text), The Perennial Press, Hong Kong, 1974, $30.00.

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